3108

RUSH-BEARING SUNDAY:

A

SERMON

PREACHED JULY 29, 1838,

IN THE

Chapel of Ambleside,

IN BEHALF OF

THE NATIONAL AND SUNDAY SCHOOLS.

By the Revd.
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1838.

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TO THE

REVEREND JOHN DAWES,

AND THE

CONGREGATION OF AMBLESIDE CHAPEL,

THIS SERMON

IS INSCRIBED BY THEIR AFFECTIONATE FRIEND

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ZECHARIAH viii. 4, 5.

Thus saith the Lord of Hosts: There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for very age.

And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof.

One cannot be much in the habit of reading the Holy Scriptures, without feeling that there is something in them we cannot tell how to express. All we know is, that the Bible is very different from every other book we read: different, not only in its old quaint language, nor even in the subjects of which it treats, but different in the way in which it comes home to us, and opens our hearts, and shows us ourselves, and fills us one while with fears and strange sadnesses, another while with hopes and joys and glimpses of dim and half-seen glories, which bear us onward far away to a quiet place of pleasantness and rest. If we open it in our mirth, it sobers and subdues us, and melts a proud man's heart to childish tears. Or, if we ask of the Oracle in dark and gloomy seasons of grief and trouble, ah! who does not know how soft and gentle thoughts keep rising up from the holy Book, like fresh water from a spring, and winning us to happiness in spite of ourselves. And all this because it is the Word of that God who spoke in old time to His Prophet, not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, but in

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the still small Voice. Not but that the Bible has its earthquakes and its fires to hard hearts and sinners that will not repent; but its whispers and its consoling melodies are ever heard deepest, clearest, sweetest when tribulation makes us, like the lonely Elijah, wrap our faces in our mantles, because we cannot bear to look upon the world, or that the world should look on us. Now, my brethren, the reason of this is, because the Bible is no mere dead book, but a very living thing: "Quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword,"* and piercing exceedingly. You recollect what the patriarch Jacob called Bethel†—"a dreadful place,"—and why he called it so: "Because God was in it and he knew it not." Now, in like manner and for the same reason, the Bible is a dreadful Book. The Holy Spirit dwells among its sacred mysteries, and moves up and down the hallowed pages, now lighting up the deep places therein, now carrying to thoughtless hearts with mighty power the hard sayings of it, or letting fall joy and consolation upon the mourner from passages he had often read before and found nothing in them. It is as the appearance of lamps in the vision of Ezekiel: "The fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning. And the living creatures ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lightning."‡ Thus it comes about, that the Bible is never tired of giving up the new and rich treasures that are there, the goodly pearls which none can find save those that sell all and buy the field, and dig diligently day and night therein.

It is never out of place in God's House to speak great things of God's Word. And I have done it now, because many of you perhaps may never have been struck by a beautiful peculiarity in it, on which I am going to say somewhat at present. During the seventy long years of her sons' captivity, poor Jerusalem had lain in ruinous heaps. The glory of the Temple was departed. Her palaces were fast falling to decay. Her walls

* Heb. iv. 21. † Gen. xxviii. 16, 17. ‡ Ezek. i, 13, 14.

were thrown down about her, and the stranger was lord in her empty halls, for the sins of those that had dwelt therein. "This is the rejoicing city that dwelt carelessly, that said in her heart, I am, and there is none beside me."† But now the Prophet Zechariah is come to tell of her new glories, and in order to set forth most strongly the blessing which God would pour upon her, he draws the picture of the text: "There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for very age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof." Now this prophecy is an example of what I mean. Some of us, in reading the Bible, must have thought it very strange that there should have been so much about children in it. We are are always meeting with them in one way or another. They occur over and over again in the Historical Books. The Psalms are full of them. They furnish the Prophets with their commonest images. And, what is strangest of all, they occupy a very conspicuous place in the doctrine and teaching of our blessed Lord. It seems strange, yet, after all, it is most natural. If we have paid any attention to the characters of our friends, we must have seen that just in proportion to a man's holiness, to a man's softness of spirit, gentleness and affectionateness of heart, was his recurrence both in thought and in conversation to the days of early childhood. Indeed youth, which is in some sense the most Christian part of life, is always looking back; and they set most on memory who have least to recollect. And this is strange too, and yet most natural.

Now this prophecy of Zechariah leads us on to Gospel times. So let us take the Four Gospels, and see what we can learn from their frequent mention of children. And indeed a thoughtful man may find there a spiritual fulfilment of this prediction. When our Saviour came, Jerusalem was rebuilt. The new Temple, though not as the ancient one had been, was yet

* Zeph. ii. 15.

"exceeding magnifical." The city was filled with multitudes of people. Old men and old women there were, waiting for His coming, and boys and girls that sang His praises, as they played about the streets. Simeon was an old man, yea, doubtless had his staff in his hand for very age. His life had been drawn out from year to year, that he might see the salvation of his God, and then depart in peace, because his loyal spirit could not hold the fulness of his joy. Anna, too, the grey-headed propheteſs, she was permitted to see with her bodily eyes, now dim with age, that God whom she had seen with the eye of faith for many a long year of service in His Temple. The young children, too, as they played, filled the courts of the Temple with their little Hosannas, and knew not what they did. But the Son of God was pleased and glorified by their unconscious praise; and rebuked those that would have rebuked them, shewing that they were, in their measure, fulfilling the sure words of prophecy. For it is written, "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained praise."* Still more surely does this prophecy bring before us the Christian Church with all her gifts and graces. She has old men and women in her streets, the streets of the New Jerusalem, the City of our God. She has them kneeling at her altars for the Bread of Life, there eating Angels' food. She filleth "their mouth with good things, making them young and lusty as an eagle." And she has boys and girls, ranged all along her aisles, lisping the name of God and of his Christ, saying solemn prayers, uttering great things out of their childish hearts, and singing lofty praises; and all the while it is a Spirit working in them mightier than themselves, for they cannot tell as yet what all this holy service means.

It has not seemed good to the Holy Ghost to record much of our Saviour's infancy; but what is given is full of teaching to ourselves. It would seem, that so intimately was He acquainted with grief, so much was He a Man of sorrows, that

* Ps. viii. 2. St. Matt. xi. 25, xxi. 16.

none could touch Him or come near Him, but they must needs drink the cup which He drank, and be baptized with the Baptism wherewith He was baptized. The little innocents of Bethlehem were only like Him in age; yet that, it seems, was reason enough that they should be like Him in suffering too. Therefore, let not weak faith think it strange to see the agony children sometimes suffer when their souls, which Holy Baptism has so lately purified, are called from earth to heaven. It is a seal of their belonging to the family of Christ. It is a family of suffering, and all that are members of it must suffer with their Head. So He himself began His precious blood-shedding when He was but eight days old, at His Circumcision. So He first took upon Himself His power, and reigned and received homage as a King, when He lay in His mother's lap, and those wise Gentiles saw in the East the Star of which Balaam had prophecied, and by the leading of the Holy Ghost came on to Bethlehem to lay their gold and frankincense and myrrh at the young child's feet. And then, as if to teach us that children were never too young to do Him service, He, being but twelve years old, began already to be about His father's business, and was found of His sorrowing mother disputing with the doctors in the Temple. Then, when His public ministry began, we find Him loving to lay His hands on little children, and to bless them. He rebukes His Disciples, who were so dull-hearted they could see no meaning in what He did. He tells them that if any one offend one of these little ones, it were better for him that he had never been born, or that a millstone were hanged about his neck and he cast into the sea. He tells us of children, that their Angels do always behold the face of their Father which is in Heaven: and He teaches His disciples, and us among the rest, that "except we be converted, and become as little children, we shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of Heaven," because, as He said before, "of such," that is little children, "is the kingdom of Heaven." Now who can read these things without being reminded of that God who made His covenant with Abraham, because he knew Him, "that He would command his children

and his household after him, that they would keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment."* And of the same God who argued with the angry and petulant Jonah, "Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night and perished in a night: and should not I spare Nineveh that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also much cattle?"† Lastly, we come to a passage in which all the others seem to meet, and by which we may explain them all:—"Whoso shall receive one such little child in My name receiveth Me!" It is then because little children are Christ's brethren,—it is because Christ himself for their sakes became a Little-one, that so much is said about them in Scripture.

And how is it that they are in an especial manner Christ's brethren? It is because of Holy Baptism. You know they were born under a curse, children of wrath, conceived in sin. But Jesus, for the so great love wherewith He loved their souls, took them for His own when they were but a few weeks old. A few drops of our spiritual Jordan sprinkled upon the unclean, the waters of Holy Baptism, made the flesh of the leper to come again like unto the flesh of a little child, better far than all the kingly rivers of Damascus, better far than man's wisdom could have devised, or his cold, dull, stubborn heart even now believe. They were made members of Christ, children of God, and inheritors of the kingdom of Heaven. Who shall tell their dignity? Who shall declare their spiritual generation? Sons of God! Heirs of Heaven! Joint Heirs with Christ! The seeds of immortal life are sown very thickly in them. Their hearts are made the temple of the Holy Ghost. Jesus Christ dwelleth in them, except they be reprobate, which they cannot be. All this we were once: and in a measure are so still. We are still Christ's brethren, still God's children, still heirs of

* Gen. xviii. 19. † Jonah iv. 10.

Heaven. But not as little children are. They have not sinned since, as we have done. They have not grieved the Holy Spirit, as we have done. Their coldness and their waywardness have not separated them from their elder Brother, as ours has often done. They have not left their Father's house, as too many of us have done, for a land of rioting and wantonness and pleasure that cannot, will not, satisfy. They walk by faith, and not by sight. They have no wills, no ways of their own. They cannot, and so they wish not, to do anything for themselves. Therefore it is that their Angels,—not merely in times of earnest prayer, in venerable Churches and at solemn Sacraments, as ours perchance may do,—but *their* Angels *always* behold the Face of their Father which is in Heaven.

This is the great and solemn view of children, as baptized children, which is given us in Holy Scripture. You will be at no loss to see why I have chosen to lay it before you on the present occasion, so intimately connected as it is with the religious meaning which has now been coupled with this Rural Festival. The garlands, with which the House of the Most High God is decorated, are full of holy mysteries and meanings. They throw us back into a different state of things. They remind us of a time when the Churches, planted among these hills, were lowly, poor and rude as buildings, yet bright, most bright with the joy and thankfulness and loyal-hearted piety of the little flocks who met therein for prayer and praise and Sacraments. They call to memory the Feast among the Jews, when water drawn from the sacred wells was borne about the courts of the Temple; while men waved green branches in their hands, and the voices of ten thousand of the sons of Abraham were heard chanting the glorious Anthem of Isaiah—"With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of Salvation:"* or that more Christian day, the Sunday of Palms, when Jesus entered into Jerusalem, and His triumphal way was strewn with the soft green

* Isaiah xii.; and see St. John vii. 37.

shoots of early Palms; the day whereon the little children learnt the Hosannas they sung about the Temple, as if to shew how meet it was in us to join their cause and interests and happiness with a day of thanksgiving and of prayer. How then shall we best keep alive this simplicity and thankfulness in a part of the land where change comes later and moves more slowly than elsewhere? How shall we be of one heart with our holy ancestors that sleep around us, but by training up the little ones amongst us in the paths of peace and pleasantness, by aiding the Schools established here for their good, by being all of us Priests, in the sense that all Christians are a Royal Priesthood, by helping to spread the Gospel among all? It is needless to add more: it is needless to explain the nature and the object and the management of these Schools. Their object is the edification of the Church of Christ among His little ones.

Trouble is out upon the earth, and fear and expectation and restlessness and perplexity. Many run to and fro, and knowledge, that cold and barren and unloving thing, is much increased. All serious men are looking out for some great thing. They, who would fain adhere to ancient landmarks in Church and State, are full of trembling. They that love the old things, yet see that Church and State have altered, whether for better or for worse, see also that the old things cannot remain as of old, and that the new things are not good, and they are full of perplexity. They who triumph at man's advance along the road of science and of power, watch the fearful swiftness of the current, and are not quite at ease as to what the end of all shall be. Oh! then by the uneasy thoughts we all have for our dear country, by the lonely prayers we pray, by our wishes and our fears, by our dim hopes and beautiful regrets and sacred memories, let us throng in this day to aid the Church of God, the only power which can bear up against the world. There is much necessity for it. In this matter we have no differences, no diversity of opinions, no fatal prejudices, party prepossessions, or cruel misunderstandings of each other.

Surely to you, my brethren, who are natives of this place, who are so deeply, so intensely, interested in its welfare, it is unnecessary to speak. The heart that feels no yearnings towards the place of its abode, is too cold, too dead, to be moved by words of mine: colder far and deader than the poor pagan shepherds who once trod these hills, and lived among their gloomy woods. For they did beautiful things, aye, and holy things, when they hung their delicate wild flowers and green rushes about the trees and wells; albeit they darkly worshipped the unknown God.

But there are others, who form no inconsiderable portion of my congregation, on whom it is needful I should urge my cause. There are many strangers here. I cannot think they came among these hills only for pleasure and amusement. Yet, if they did, they must by this have learnt among their marvels, their lights and shades, their solitudes and strange recesses, some glorious things of the Lord their God,

——— Here where He hath built
For His own glory in the wilderness.*

My brethren, if this country has been to you a fountain of deep and serious thoughts, of holy and moral impressions, if you have looked upon it as in some sense a puplic domain wherewith God hath gifted our nation, if you have felt your love drawn to its lakes and rivers and hill-side villages in a way you never felt before, and cannot now explain, if you are carrying from it a thousand memories that will never desert you, sights and sounds and heavenly images to haunt you evermore, can you turn away and not leave a gift unto the Lord our God? Oh! it shall delight you afterwards to remember that upon these mighty hills, as on a holy altar, and altars green and glorious they are and not of man's building, you have left your

* Wordsworth.

pious offering. Let it be as full and free, as open and ungrudging as hath been the tide of joys which the land has poured in upon you from the Throne of God that is set up so visibly therein. You may never have seen a Church of God so decorated as this. You may never see this Holy Rite again. Make, then, these garlands to minister to piety and holiness. Make them to be connected with the everlasting Covenant, a type, a symbol of the freshness and innocence which the early lessons of the Gospel shall shed upon the little ones that would fain sing Hosannas in this Mountain Temple. Let this Festival write upon our hearts a lesson deep and grave to bear unto our homes; and let us leave the Holy Shrine this day with the words wherewith the Three Children praised the Lord their God, a deep and silent, yet a thrilling Benedicite, filling our souls with thankfulness and love.

O ye Mountains, and Hills, bless ye the Lord: praise Him and magnify him for ever.

O all ye Green Things upon the Earth, bless ye the Lord: praise Him and magnify Him for ever.

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